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# Trivializing Christianity

Canada has been called the vichyssoise of nations—cold, half-French and hard to stir. But some of Canada's Catholic bishops are trying to stir their nation to a rolling boil.

Canada is suffering from the world slump: it has 13 percent unemployment. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's government, like the governments (of the left and right) in most developed nations, is bewildered by the task of making the welfare state compatible with an essentially capitalist economy vigorous enough to finance the state. Now a commission of Canadian bishops has made a stunningly silly plunge into criticism of economic policy, thereby undermining respect for the teaching role of the church.

Consider their definition of an "export-oriented" policy: it is a policy of "providing resources or products for markets elsewhere, rather than serving basic needs of people in this country." That is representative of the bishops' understanding.

There is in Christian, and especially Catholic, social thought a tradition that is hostile toward capitalism, and especially toward the severe laissez-faire ideology of 19th century liberalism. This hostility is of a piece with the church's anti-Marxism: it is opposition to "economism," the treatment of persons as means rather than ends, the subordination of individuals and moral choices to impersonal forces.

The church rightly insists on the subordination of economic science to moral philosophy. The market is a marvelous allocator of resources, but it is not a supreme court, above appeal. Respect for the market's allocation of wealth and opportunity is conditioned by considerations of social harmony and equity—in short, by political considerations. However, the

bishops' pronouncement features infantile leftism ("community ownership and control of industries") and, what is worse, an unwillingness to face honestly difficult moral choices.

Platitude chases platitude through seven pages. "The needs of the poor have priority over the wants of the rich. . . . The rights of workers are more important than the maximization of profits." The juxtaposition of wants and needs, and insertion of the word "maximization," makes the observations vacuous.

The bishops cite "the ethical principle that labor, not capital, must be given priority." But a real ethical principle is a guide to action, which the bishops' sentiment is not. Without capital formation, there is no job creation. But, then, the bishops frown on "labor-saving technology." Evidently they believe labor-saving technology must mean a net loss of jobs to society. It is peculiar for friends of workers to disparage technology that has made, say, mining and agricultural less onerous.

What does the phrase "survival of capital" mean in the bishops' assertion that "the survival of capital takes priority over labor in present strategies for economic recovery." It would be sentimental to postulate an identity of interests between management and workers. But it is ideological ignorance to postulate an inherent, stark conflict between the interests of "capital" and "labor." Such careless moralizing injures the Catholic Church's earned reputation for rigor and precision.

Of course, Canada's bishops say their criticism of Trudeau's tax and budget policies is "inspired" by the Gospel. They make much of the fact that Jesus' mission was to bring "good

news to the poor," and the fact that Jesus "was himself a worker." From such facts they bring Canada's economic policy to judgment.

There is no surer trivialization of the mysteries of Christianity than the pretense that the faith, properly scrutinized, supports this or that fiscal and monetary policy. But this is axiomatic: clergy become vocal about headline-grabbing controversies of social policy when they lose confidence in their ability to speak convincingly about such untrendy subjects as sin and salvation.

U.S. Catholic bishops have become prime-time players debating defense policy. Last fall they debated a pronouncement that *Newsweek*, in a description common in the press, said "flatly repudiated the Reagan administration policies on nuclear deterrence." Actually, the statement came close to repudiating nuclear deterrence, the policy of eight presidents.

Lots of clergy have convinced themselves that the cure of souls begins—and perhaps ends—with the cure of social ills. But before U.S. bishops start excavating in the Bible for moral imperatives about economic strategies, they should consider the cautionary example of the Canadian bishops.

They have made an uneconomical expenditure of their authority, squandering their claim on public attention, by making moral declarations—"inspired" by the Bible—against, for example, hydroelectric projects. There are U.S. bishops capable of discovering that Jesus, were He among us now, would favor higher marginal tax rates. But what Dean William Inge said cannot be said too often: Christianity is good news, not good advice.